

By Madhu Krishnamurthy and Deborah Donovan (Daily Herald)

Hundreds of area residents packed the Arlington Heights village hall boardroom to debate health care reform at a town-hall meeting Monday led by U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk.

With standing and squatting room only in a room with capacity for 350 people, police sealed village hall and a second session was scheduled for hundreds of people who waited outside.

Even before the meeting started, the debate was raging on the street among spectators carrying placards who argued the merits of President Barack Obama's health care reform plan ---- some chanted "health care for all" and others responded "freedom."

Most among the hundreds of people waiting outside lived within Kirk's 10th Congressional District and many said they were urged to take part in the debate through e-mails from his office, from the 10th District Democrats and from groups affiliated with Citizen Action Illinois.

A majority of the crowd attending both sessions were Kirk supporters, but there also were critics who questioned his voting record on health care issues.

Tony Smith of Arlington Heights said he wanted to talk with Kirk because he voted for legislation putting "a cap on the amount you can sue a doctor for."

Cindy Flatebo of Grayslake said no one knows what is in the 1,000-page HR 3200 health care reform bill Congress is considering.

"I want bullet points and the 'Cliff Notes' version," she said.

She added Congress needs a health care plan for citizens "that they would vote for themselves."

Kirk rejected Obama's push for a government-run insurance option as part of comprehensive legislation aimed at extending health coverage to nearly 50 million uninsured and underinsured Americans and curbing rising insurance costs.

Kirk contends the number of uninsured is inflated and only a small percentage are American citizens who cannot afford health care and don't already have other options.

"This number is not large enough to justify the president's bill," Kirk said. "Should we provide taxpayer health care for people who are illegally here in the U. S.? I do not think we should provide federally-subsidized health care to illegal aliens."

The crowd resoundingly agreed with him. The measure being proposed doesn't provide health insurance coverage to undocumented immigrants.

But Frank Skorski of Palatine said he received a Medicaid form in the mail that clearly states immigration status would not be used to withhold benefits.

"Illegal immigrants are getting all kinds of health care," Skorski said. "It's got to stop. They are the reason (for rising costs)."

The idea of public health insurance appealed, though, to many audience members who themselves have fallen through the cracks of the current system that largely favors employer-based health insurance plans.

"It gives me the ability to afford insurance," said Brian Dvoret of Wheeling who is currently unemployed. "That public option allows me to get that access."

Dvoret said as an individual buyer, he loses out on much lower group health insurance policy rates and gets limited coverage.

Kirk said his biggest problem with public option is it would bankrupt government. With the federal government's track record of administering Medicare, it would be disastrous to undertake another huge unfunded health care initiative, he said.

"I feel that we made a commitment to seniors through Social Security and Medicare and we don't even have money for those," he said. "I think we need to honor those commitments first."

John Terrell of Lindenhurst agreed the real issue is unfunded liability.

He called for funding Medicare "so all of us baby boomers and our parents don't have to worry."

Obama's plan has taken a beating at similar town hall meetings across the country. While Obama's public option proposal is an alternative choice to private insurance, not a replacement for it, his proposal often is compared to nationalized systems.

Kirk said the U.S. health care system is flawed but still better than the national health care systems of the United Kingdom and Canada.

"One of the things that has gone right with American health care is cancer survival rates," Kirk said. "In the U.S., the survival rates are higher than over in Europe."

He said he also worries about how quickly people would be treated.

"One of the things we worry about in a government system is care delayed is care denied," he said. "Early detection is critical for survival, and we want to make sure that we preserve that."

Nick Blackbourn of Arlington Heights, originally from the United Kingdom, took issue with Kirk's comments toward Britain's National Health Service.

"In England, we as a country decided that health care is a right and not a privilege," Blackbourn said. "As a whole, everyone is proud of the NHS. In England, I quit my job, I didn't have to think about health insurance because I was going to be covered by NHS. It's easy to create horror stories."

As an alternative to Obama's plan, Kirk outlined his own "centrist" health care reform proposal that he said has bipartisan support. He said it addresses one of the biggest contributors to soaring health care costs, medical malpractice lawsuits.

Kirk's proposal also promotes patient-controlled electronic medical records and the measure would have provisions for Americans to buy health insurance from any state, where now people must buy it from a provider in their state.

*This article was edited to comply with Franking Commission Guidelines.*